

Dr Tad Gwiazdowski and Dr Andrew Mearman's ongoing EASYTAP (Easing your transition after the pandemic) project with students about their transition into second year, after the extraordinary first year they have had. Our survey and focus group showed that our student body is not homogeneous, differing in their attitude to and uses of technology; but they generally prefer greater social interaction. Students were mainly confident about teaching and learning in the new academic year (2021-22) but had some concerns about once again becoming not social and independent, but isolated, learners.

Easing Your Transition After the Pandemic (EASYTAP) Study preliminary report

Background

Under any circumstances, student transition through university can be rather messy ([Gale and Parker, 2014](#)), far from the smooth, linear journey one might sometimes envisage. Further, these transitions vary across student groups ([Kahu and Nelson, 2018](#)). So, we cannot ever legitimately merely assume that a student reaching second year fits any single, modal profile.

The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on learning, causing a rapid online pivot, meaning in many cases that students had no face-to-face teaching in 2020-21. The impacts of this disruption on student learning outcomes have been shown to be on average quite negative, with considerable variation across the population (see [Cellini, 2021](#)). Existing educational inequalities were amplified as students lost access to full suite of university facilities and resources and fell back on home environments often not conducive to learning. Students reported a feeling of imposter syndrome ([Pownall et al 2021](#)) and student leaders stressed that new students needed extra help building social connections and confidence ([Price 2021](#)). Anecdotally our students reported not feeling ready for year 2, as they felt their first year had not been an authentic experience, not helping them adjust to being independent people.

The EASYTAP project

The EAYSTAP project aimed to understand student feeling about the year past (2020-21) and the coming year (2021-22) and to identify possible interventions we as staff could make. It was driven by primarily three questions:

- How confident are students feeling about teaching as they transition – and why?
- How confident are students feeling about wider university life as they transition – and why?
- What differences, if any, are there between different {groups of} students?

In order to find out, we gathered the views of first year students primarily in Economics, via a mixed-question online survey tool and focus groups, conducted by a student research intern from LITE. The survey was designed with input from an economics student representative, and colleagues from Psychology.

Logistical challenges meant that both instruments were deployed later than planned, which may have reduced response rates. Consequently, we received 47 responses (a response rate of just over 10%) and conducted one focus group. The survey sample is neither exhaustive of the population nor fully representative.

The study can therefore be regarded as an exploratory pilot and its findings preliminary. Nonetheless, we find them interesting and in line with other literature.

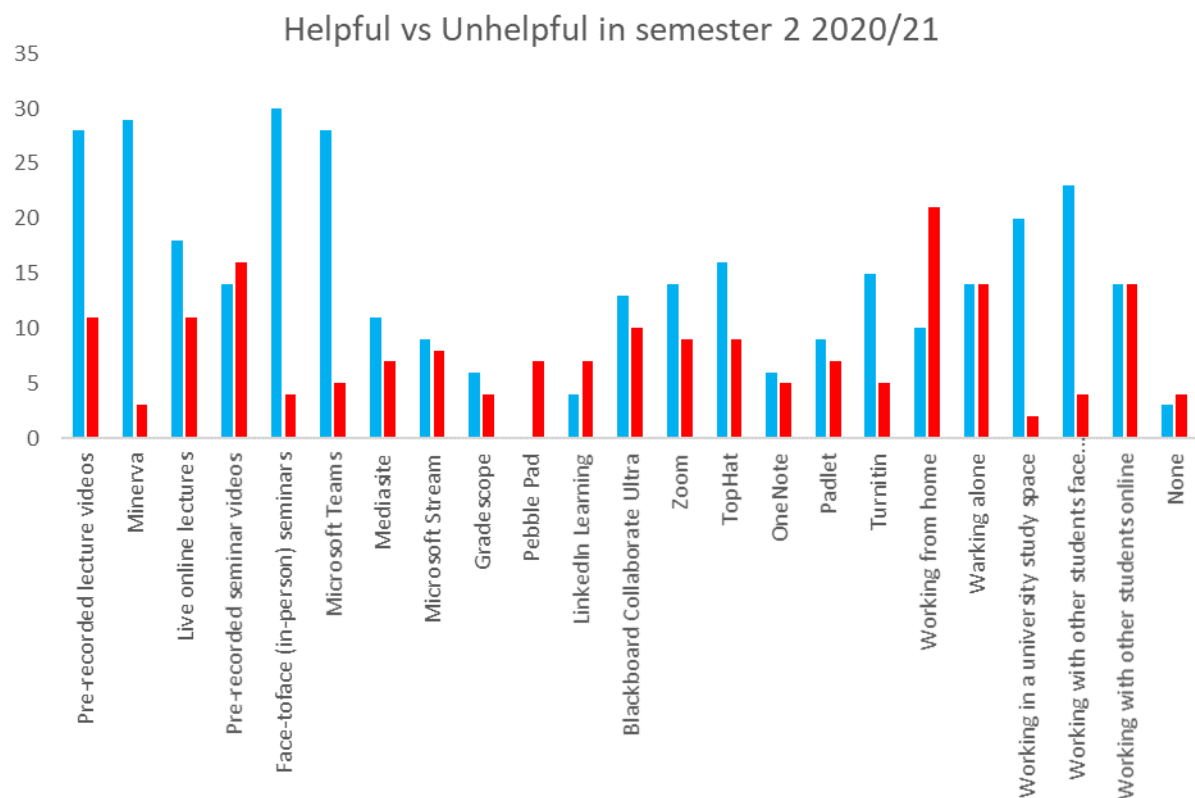
Findings

Teaching and learning technologies

The survey asked students which technologies they found helpful to their learning in 2020-21, how confident they felt that year, and how they used their time. It then asked similar questions about their expectations for 2021-22.

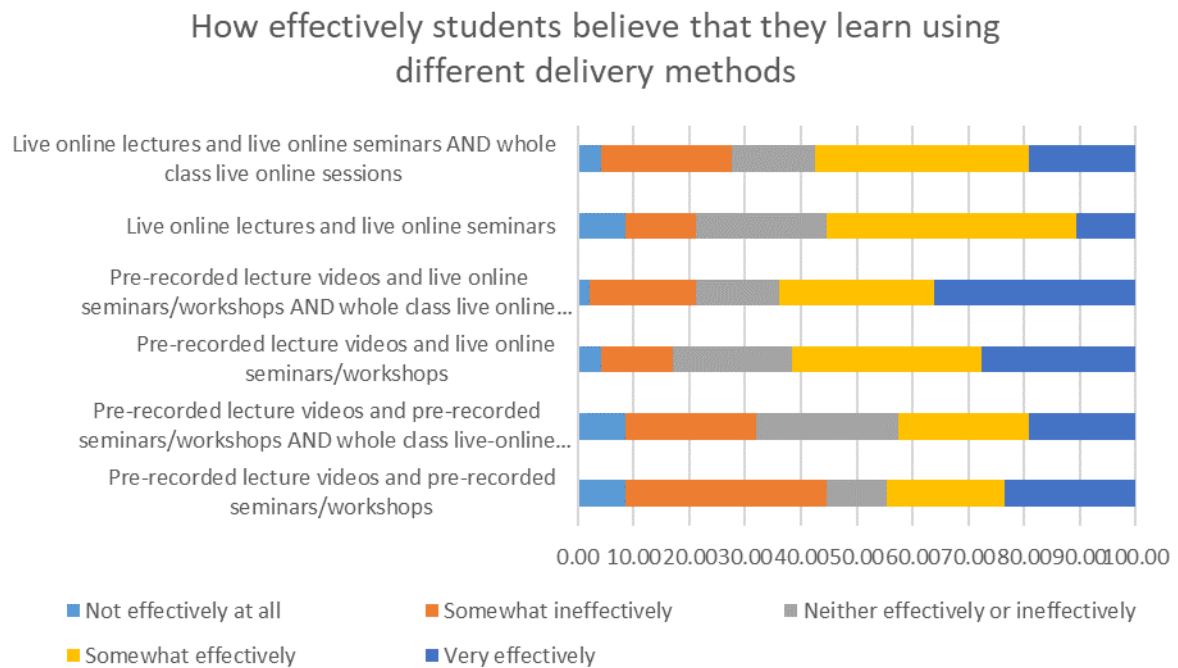
The first finding was that students there was a variety of platforms that they found useful, and not useful to their learning. What emerges already from the data presented in Figure 1 is that students welcomed having pre-recorded lectures and resources offered via the virtual learning platform, Minerva; and they explained that this was because the flexibility offered by the recordings and the ability to watch them repeatedly. They expressed that they felt confident about these aspects of online learning. University study spaces were also regarded as helpful. Another theme emerging here is that students really value face-to-face, be that working together in seminars, or in groups outside. However, working with students online, working alone and working from home were all regarded as unhelpful

Figure 1: What did students find helpful and unhelpful in semester 2 2020/21?



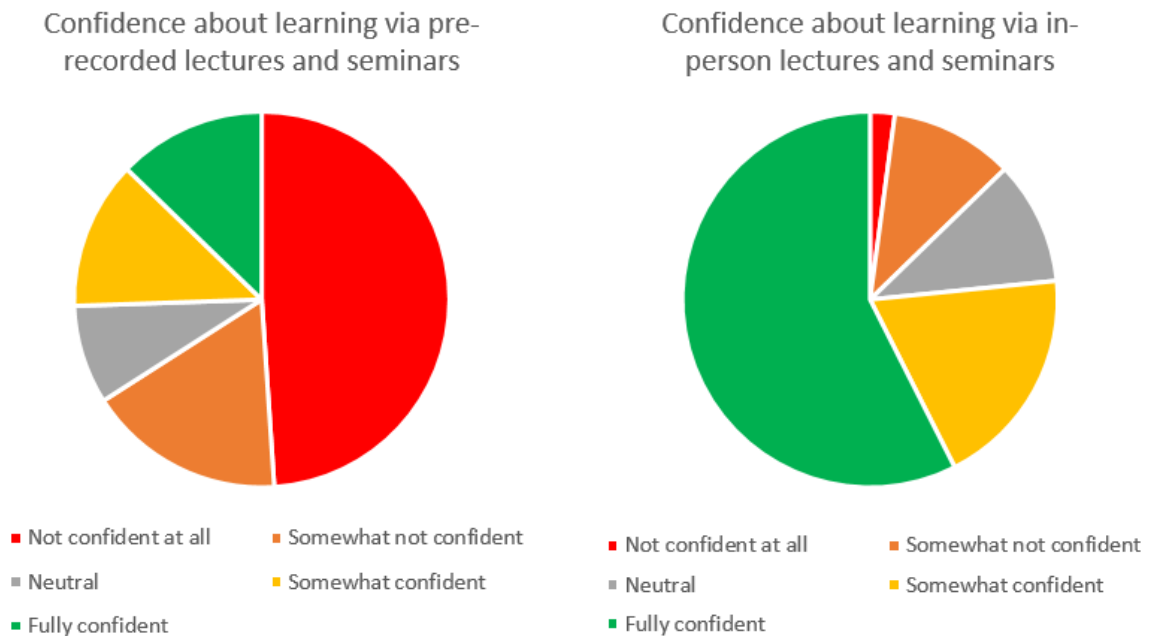
Similar patterns emerge when we consider students' beliefs about effectiveness of learning modes. The findings are shown in Figure 2. The results suggest that overall students prefer live encounters combined with some pre-recorded material. Pre-recorded seminars were regarded as not effective. Qualitative responses to the survey suggested that these findings reflected the value students place on interaction and being able to ask questions live.

Figure 2: Students' beliefs about effectiveness of learning modes



We then asked students to consider two extreme scenarios for future learning, one in which learning took place entirely via pre-recorded lectures and seminars, and another in which learning took place in live in-person lectures and seminars - see Figure 3.

Figure 3: Confidence about learning via pre-record versus in-person



There is a clear picture here: only 26% of students were somewhat or fully confident about learning via pre-recorded lectures and seminars. By contrast, 76% of students were somewhat or fully confident about learning via in-person lectures and seminars. Again, this suggests students place considerable value on face-to-face interaction. Students did respond that in the pre-recorded

scenario, they did enjoy the flexibility and opportunity to revisit material afforded here. They also admitted that in-person live lectures were a concern because of worries about contracting Covid, being distracted in the lecture environment and generally adjusting to the new mode of teaching that large lectures represent. Nonetheless, an emergent feeling was that some of the students were vehemently opposed to the pre-record scenario and highly enthusiastic about the in-person live scenario. When asked about what they felt confident in the pre-recorded scenario, 6 of 47 students responded explicitly 'nothing'; likewise, 14 of 47 responded that they felt least confident about 'nothing' in the live scenario. For these students, in-person teaching was superior to pre-recorded. Some students explained that this was because in-person activity allowed them to share and discuss ideas. For others, though it seemed they had complete faith in live in-person lectures, a technology they have never actually experienced, one which literature shows students feel very uncomfortable using. What explains this is hard to divine but one respondent's answer was that the lecture gives the students an "actual university experience". The lecture is part of the expected suite of experiences the student will have, and its absence is disquieting.

The findings above also suggested some heterogeneity in our sample. Indeed, exploring the data further with various data description techniques¹, we suggest two fairly distinct groups: one more sanguine about learning technology and the other strongly believing that in-person teaching and a return to normality in 2021/2 would be vastly superior to what they had experienced in 2020/1. The group that was more neutral about teaching technology, was more international, more ethnically diverse, more female and generally more confident than the other group, who strongly favoured live and in-person teaching. This group also reported working less than the other group. We guess that this group has a strong preference for recreating their school environment at university.

Confidence

We asked students to express their confidence across a variety of activities both in the recent past (semester 2, 2020/1) and the future (semester 1, 2021/22). The summary statistics can be seen in lines x, y, and z in Table A1. Here, we can see students are more confident about their studies in year 2: more confident first listening to material (0.51 up to 0.56), more confident studying in their own time (0.59 up to 0.70), and more confident balancing study and extra-curricular activities (0.55 up to 0.74). We can see the distribution of these responses in figures 4, 5 and 6 below: again, it is important to note that the group is not homogeneous.

Figure 4: Students' confidence about studying material for the first time. This was defined as, "when first listening to lectures, studying lecture material, preparing/attending seminars and workshops".

¹ These techniques included: non-parametric correlations, cross-tabulations, tests of difference between group means, and hierarchical cluster analysis (Ward's method). Where possible, these were subject to tests for statistical significance but, given the sample size, we are cautious about these findings and do not report them here. In some cases, tests failed: for example, chi-squared tests of significant difference between classes in cross-tabulations require a minimum number of cases per class, which was not always achieved.

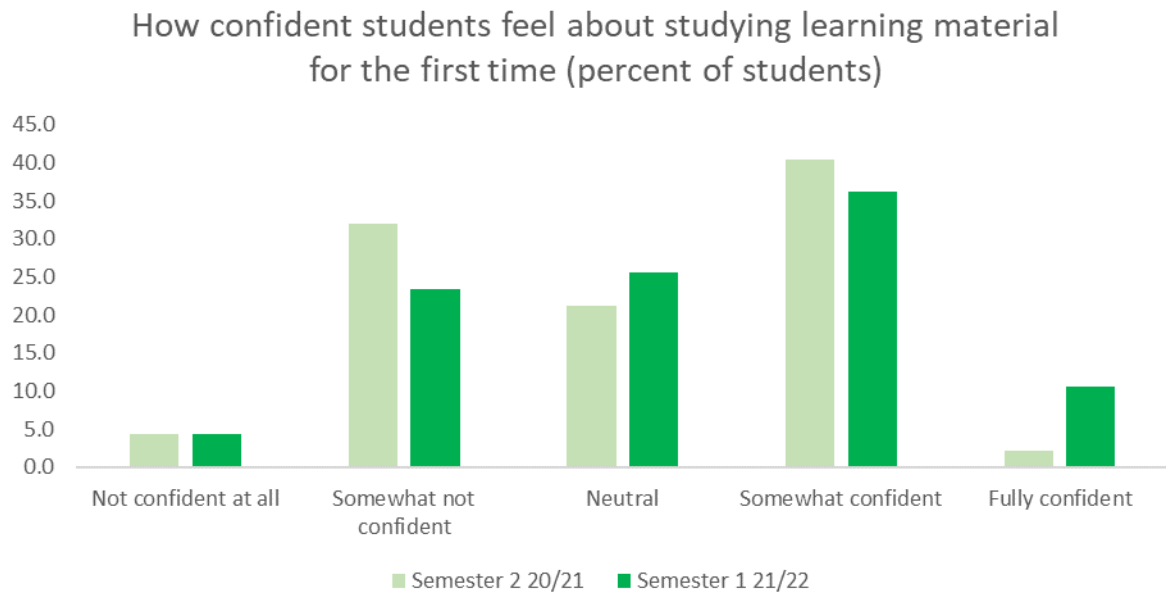


Figure 5: Students' confidence about studying in their own time

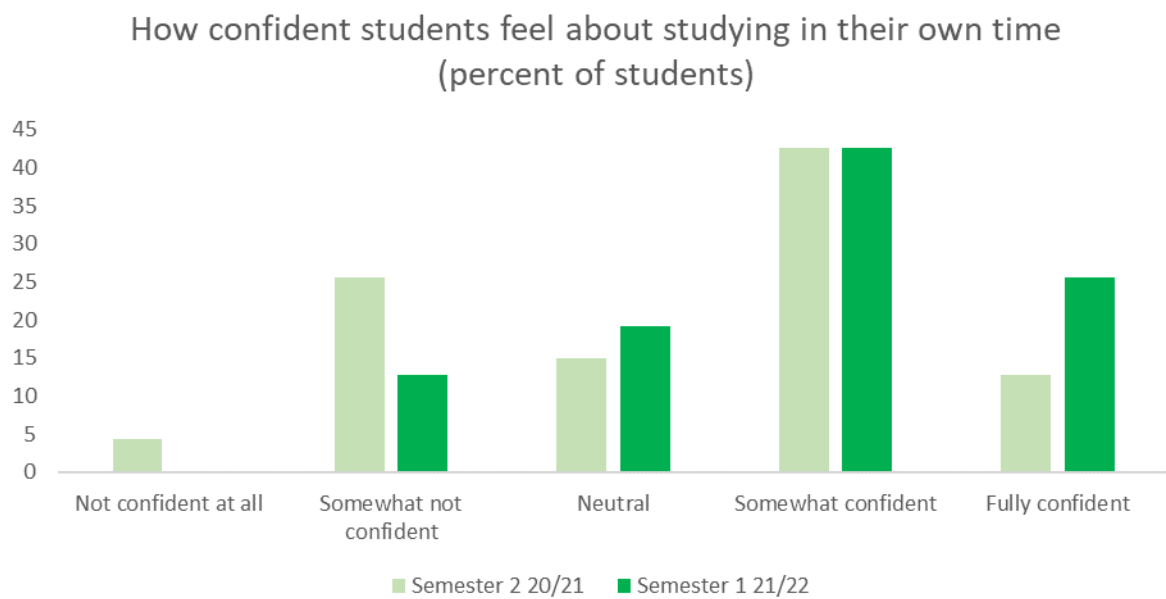
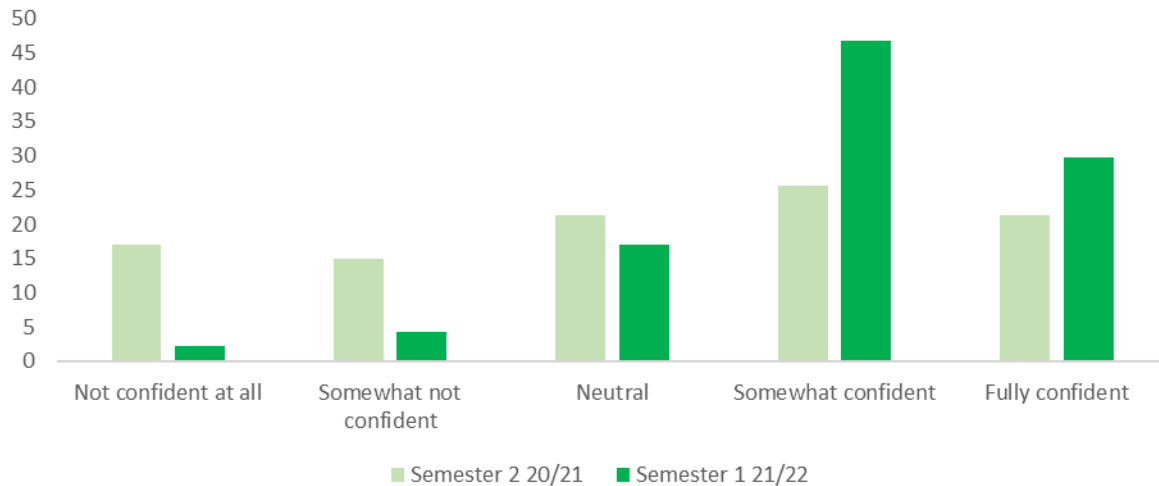


Figure 6: Students' confidence about balancing extra-curricular and academic commitments.

How confident students feel about balancing extra-curricular and academic activities (percent of students)



Moreover, as with confidence in different learning technologies, there were differences between students in terms of biographical variables. Female students report expecting more confidence balancing study with extra-curricular activities in semester 1 of 2021/22 (0.46 up to 0.70). International students expect to be more confident first listening to material (0.44 up to 0.65).

Time

An important element of studying, being a student and, indeed, being an independent person, is time management. A significant element of that is having realistic expectations about what is possible in the time available. Table 1 shows summary statistics for time use. Note that these data are self-reported and hence may be unreliable; nonetheless our data are interesting. Students are expecting to engage for more *hours per week* in year 2: more time first listening to material (14.1 up to 16.3 hours per week), more time studying in their own time (8.7 up to 14.6 hours), and more time on extra-curricular activities (5.9 up to 9.4). Again, there is variety here: female students report spending more time on studies and less on extra-curricular activities. International students spend less time first listening to material and more in their own time. International students are more pragmatic about pre-recorded content. This is perhaps because, often as non-native English speakers, they struggle more in the live lecture environment and benefit much more from the ability to use recordings that allow them to go at their own pace.

Recommendations

This study is a small-scale pilot, and the nature of the sample means that we are unable to draw strong conclusions from it. Further, it was not large enough to attribute much power to any statistical tests that we conducted. Nonetheless, our findings fit with other evidence on online learning and make intuitive sense. Hence, we believe they support some recommendations.

First, social events are always important in building community and a sense of belonging, perhaps never more so than in 2021/22. However, we must be mindful that these events are inclusive, meaning that if in person they must be held in neutral venues; but also, that they ought to be hybrid, to allow those unable to participate – because of location, illness, or concern about Covid-19 – to participate.

Second, students in the survey and focus group expressed concerns about mental health, motivation and isolation. Rather than being the social but independent learners of a typical year, some students appeared to be isolated learners. Students in our sample craved in-person contact and this ought to be facilitated, not just in teaching but – perhaps more importantly – outside teaching. These interactions would hopefully boost psychological well-being and help students become more effective learners. For some students, though, such interactions are more difficult, suggesting the role for buddying in providing necessary support.

Third, some feeling can be detected in the data that students entering second year in 2021/22 are fundamentally different from those preceding them. Recall that for many, their final year of pre-university education was also severely disrupted by the covid pandemic. They certainly feel as if they need to be treated differently. A lengthy extract from the focus group sums up this case – and accompanying plea – well:

So I'm, I'm confident that it's going to be better, I just really hope that the university and teachers in particular, are going to be *a bit more lenient with us* than they would be usually with second year students who have had this first year experience in person. So I hope that they will *forgive us for certain mistakes*, and they will *not be as bad in correcting or harsh with us, as they would usually be*, just because we didn't have this experience. And it's not technically our fault, even though we tried really hard. It was just different this year. So I hope they're *going to see that and they're going to get a bit of a feeling for our situation* instead of just pushing the usual curriculum and usual approach on us, like they did this year (Level 1 Econ, emphasis added)

The message here is that students need to be treated more gently than in previous years, to take account of their general circumstances, specifically the loss of their formative first year. This seems a reasonable request. It is also reasonable to ask whether they come to second year as well prepared as they normally would. The more controversial implication in the quotation is that their work should be marked more leniently than in previous years. The case for this is obvious but the case against is also quite strong, particularly when considering the experience of students who graduated last year, arguably in even more difficult circumstances, many of whom did not receive assessments, grades or feedback on second semester modules. These students proceeded as normal and indeed performed well, even removing the effects of the university's no detriment policy.

Future research

Continually understanding more about student preferences for delivery types is an evolving and relevant research area. Live in person lectures have traditionally been viewed as exotic but quintessential.

How time use and confidence develops as students progress through their degrees would be valuable and could help us understand the impact of various learning opportunities.

This is a pilot study, and its findings must be treated with care. Future iterations of the project must:-

- Achieve a higher response rate on the survey and more focus group participants
- Distinguish more clearly what students prefer and what really helps their learning
- Understand better the background, conditions and present biases of the respondents
- Track respondents to assess change in their perceptions, behaviour and conditions
- Find objective data to help assess time use and actual belonging

Table A1: comparative statistics

		Conf	Not-Conf	Home	Int	Female	Male
First listen confidence	20/21	0.62	0.38	0.55	0.44	0.50	0.53
	21/22	0.70	0.39	0.52	0.65	0.50	0.63
First listen time	20/21	14.8	13.2	15	12.5	16	12.5
	21/22	16.5	16.1	16.8	15.4	17.3	15.5
Own study confidence	20/21	0.72	0.42	0.53	0.69	0.54	0.64
	21/22	0.85	0.52	0.66	0.78	0.68	0.74
Own study time	20/21	10	7.0	6.5	12.5	10.5	7.7
	21/22	14.4	14.9	14.8	14.3	15.8	13.9
Confidence balancing study and extra-curricular	20/21	0.73	0.32	0.54	0.56	0.46	0.65
	21/22	0.82	0.65	0.78	0.69	0.70	0.79
Time balancing study and extra-curricular	20/21	6.3	5.4	5.2	7.2	4.0	7.7
	21/22	10.4	8.2	9.3	9.6	7.0	11.5
Pre-rec lec + sem	20/21	0.57	0.50	0.46	0.68	0.59	0.52
Pre-rec lec + sem and whole class hours	20/21	0.57	0.54	0.48	0.68	0.60	0.52
Pre-rec lec + online sem	20/21	0.71	0.62	0.62	0.76	0.74	0.62
Pre-rec lec + online sem + whole class hours	20/21	0.75	0.62	0.66	0.75	0.69	0.70
Online lec + sem	20/21	0.59	0.60	0.55	0.66	0.63	0.56
Online lec +sem + whole class hours	20/21	0.63	0.58	0.57	0.69	0.59	0.63
Pre-rec lec + sem	21/22	0.38	0.23	0.20	0.50	0.40	0.26
In-person lecture + sem + whole class hours	21/22	0.80	0.80	0.88	0.66	0.68	0.89
n		26	21	30	17	20	25

Notes: "Conf" stands for "confidence" and "Int" for international i.e. a non-UK student. Confidence scores are measures on a scale where 0 indicates students are not very confident at all, 0.5 whether students are neither confidence nor not-confident, and 1 where students are very confident. Time is measured in hours per week.